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Stern et al.

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(54) **AIRCRAFT SKIN ATTACHMENT SYSTEM**

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B64C 3/26 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B64C 1/12** (2013.01); **B64C 3/26** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC **B64C 1/12**; **B64C 3/26**; **F16B 5/0032**;
F16B 5/0052; **F16B 5/0614**; **F16B 12/22**
See application file for complete search history.

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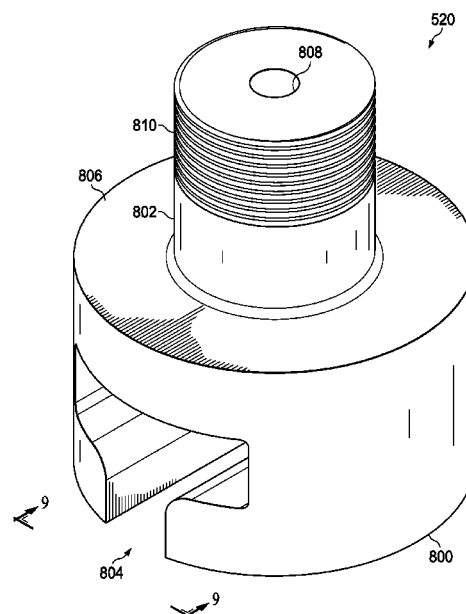
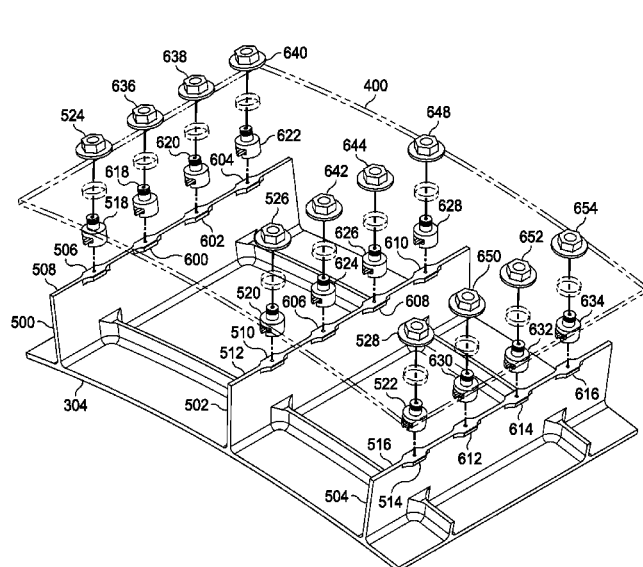
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method and apparatus for operating an aircraft. The aircraft is flown. A skin panel is held on a support structure. The support structure has flanges on a number of edges of the support structure, the flanges being substantially orthogonal to the edges. The support structure also has openings into the support structure substantially orthogonal to the flanges. First connecting structures on clips are connected to the flanges and positioned such that an opening in each clip is aligned with one of the openings in the support structure. The skin panel is positioned such that the clips are received in holes in the skin panel. Fasteners are attached to the second connecting structures such that the support structure holds the skin panel.

20 Claims, 20 Drawing Sheets



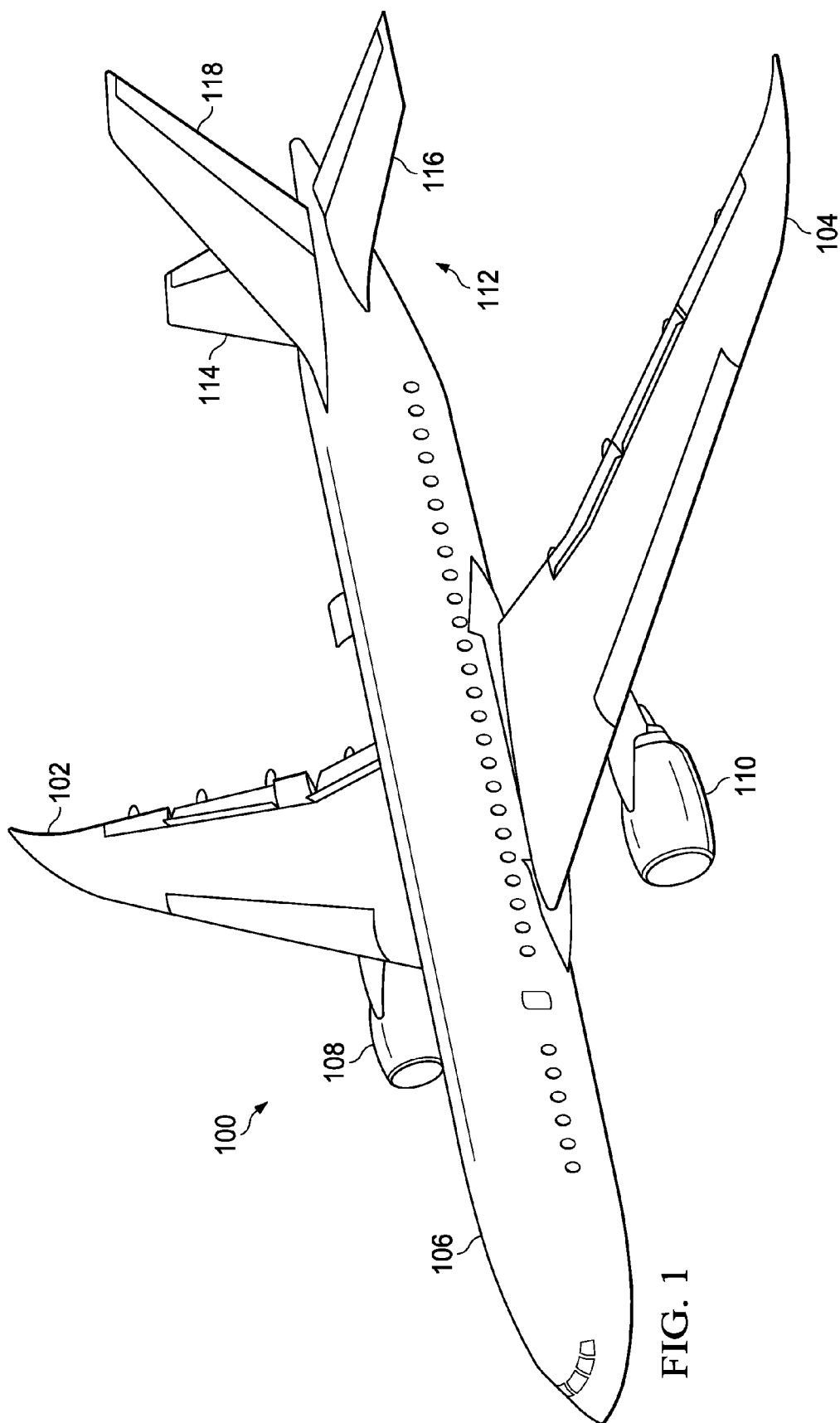


FIG. 1

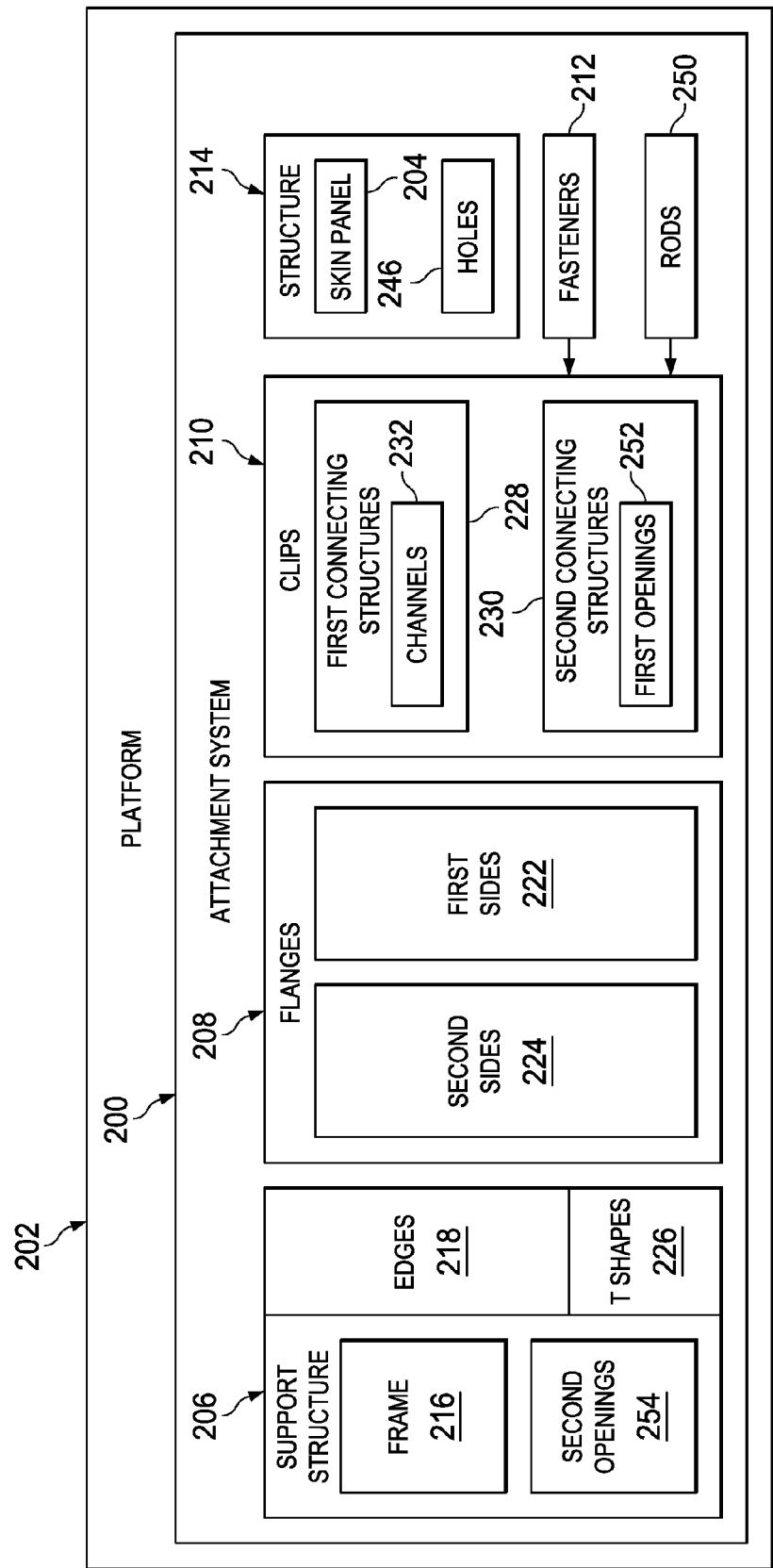
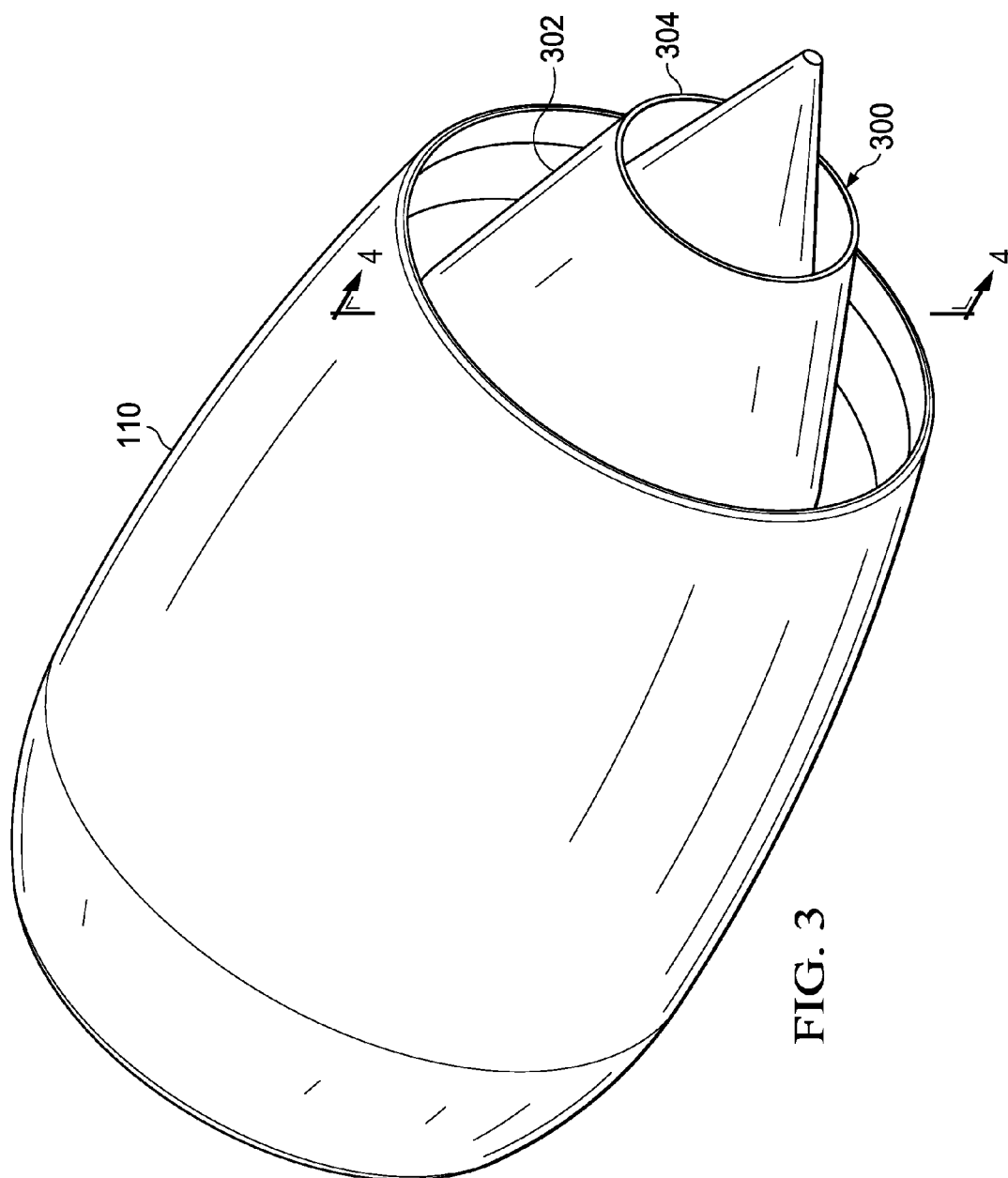
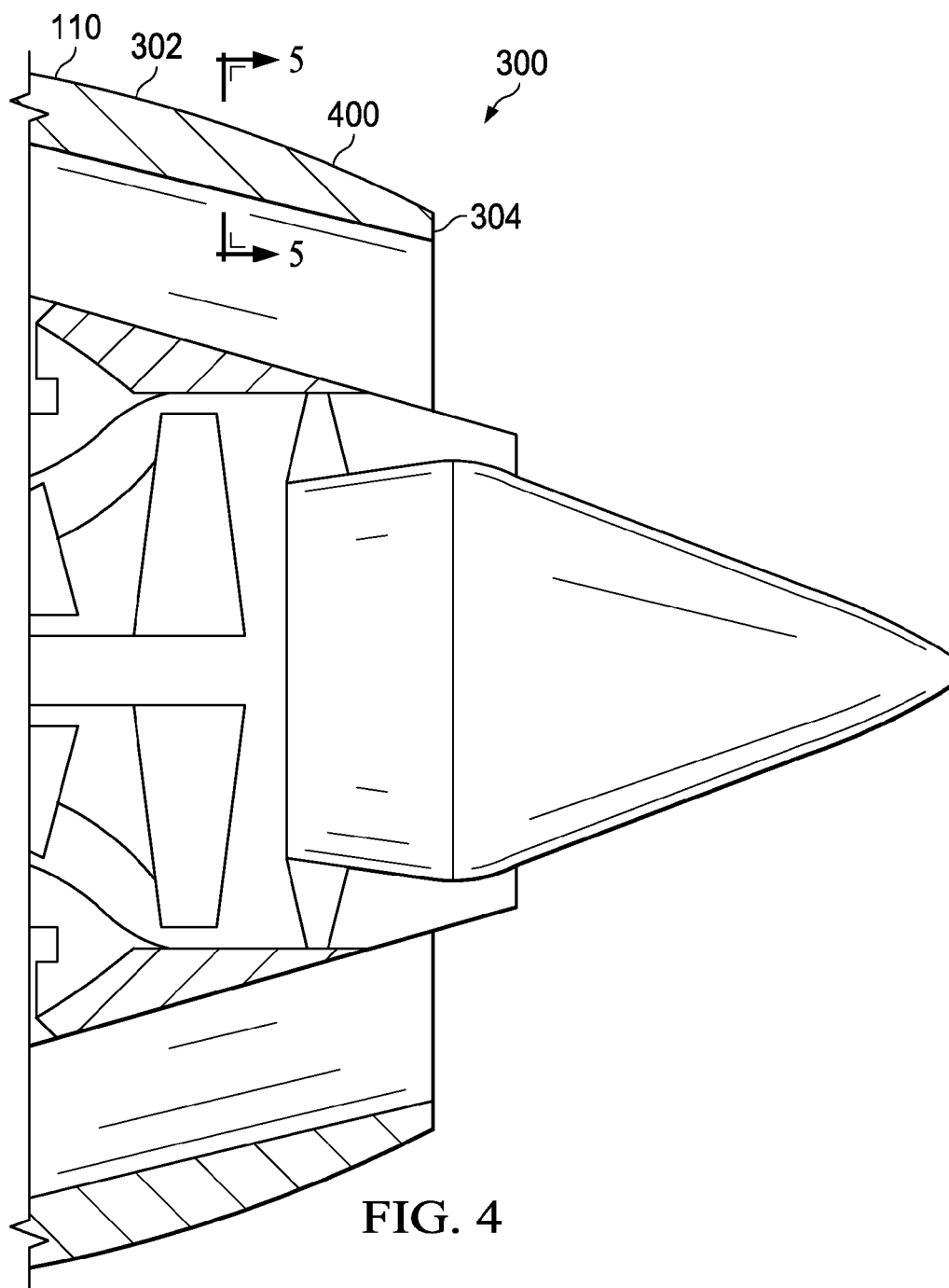
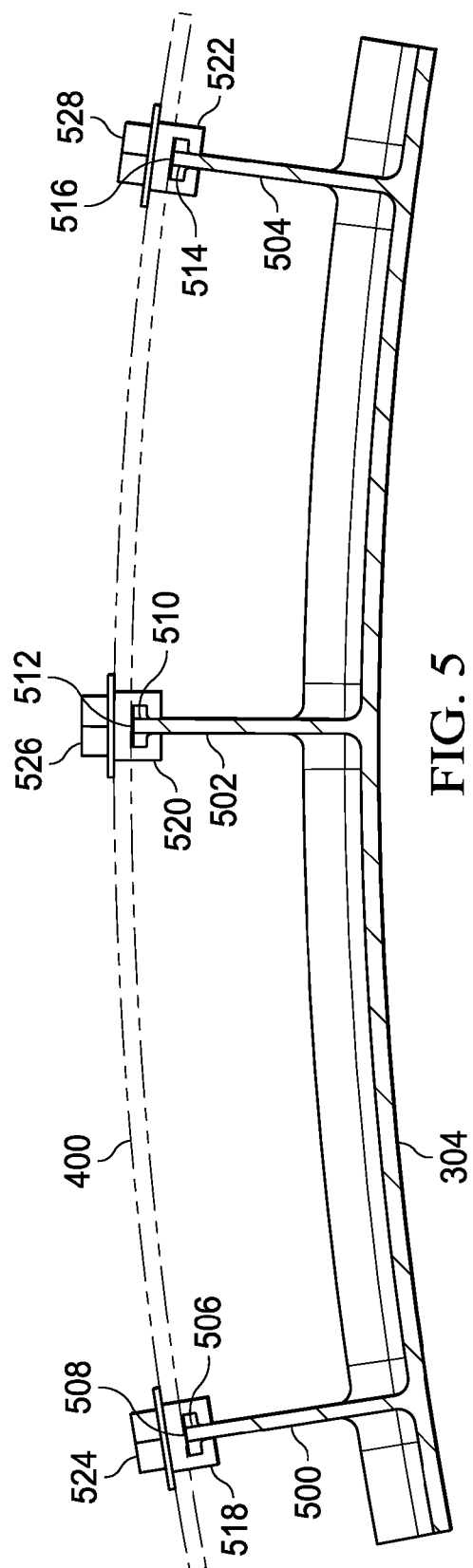


FIG. 2







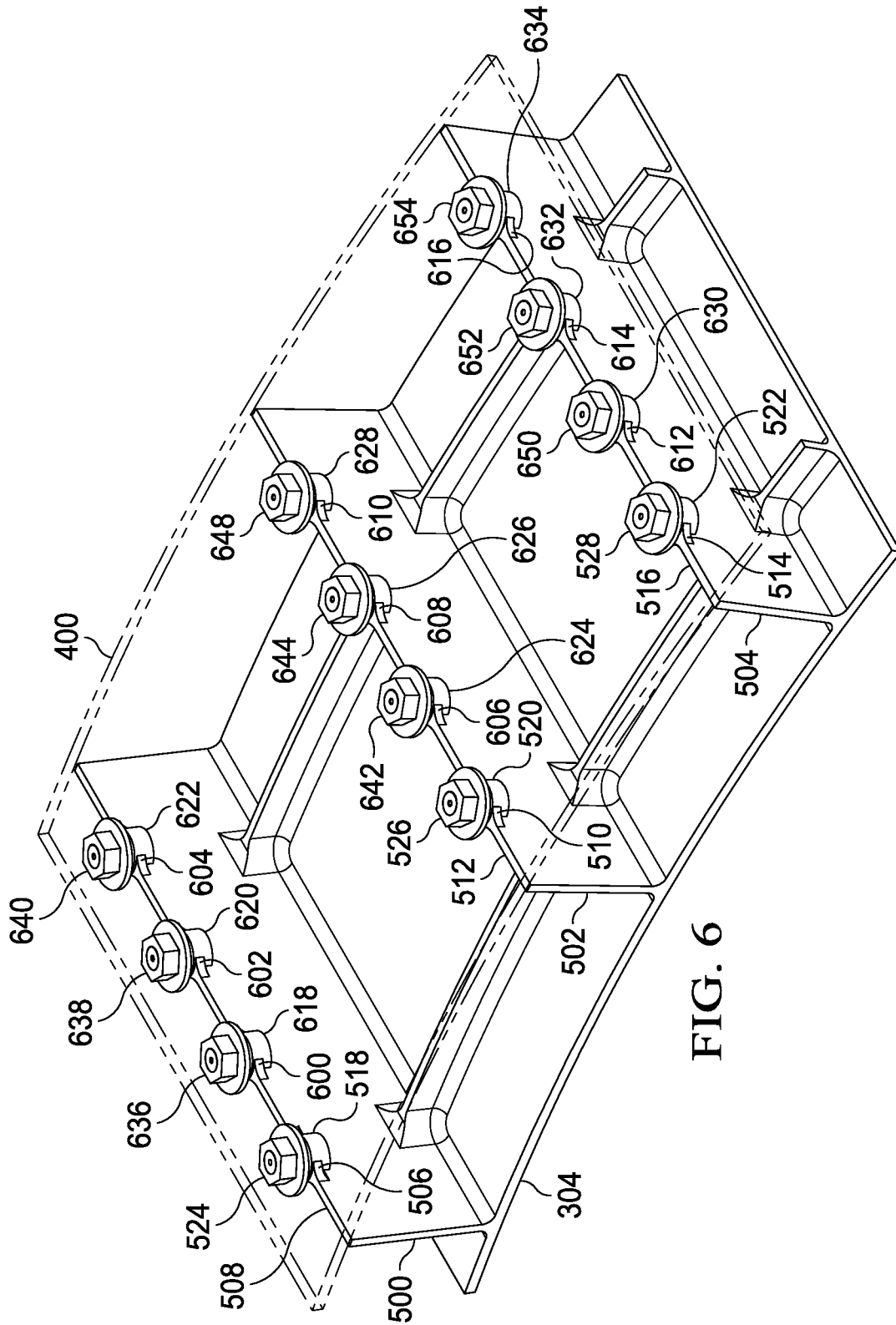


FIG. 6

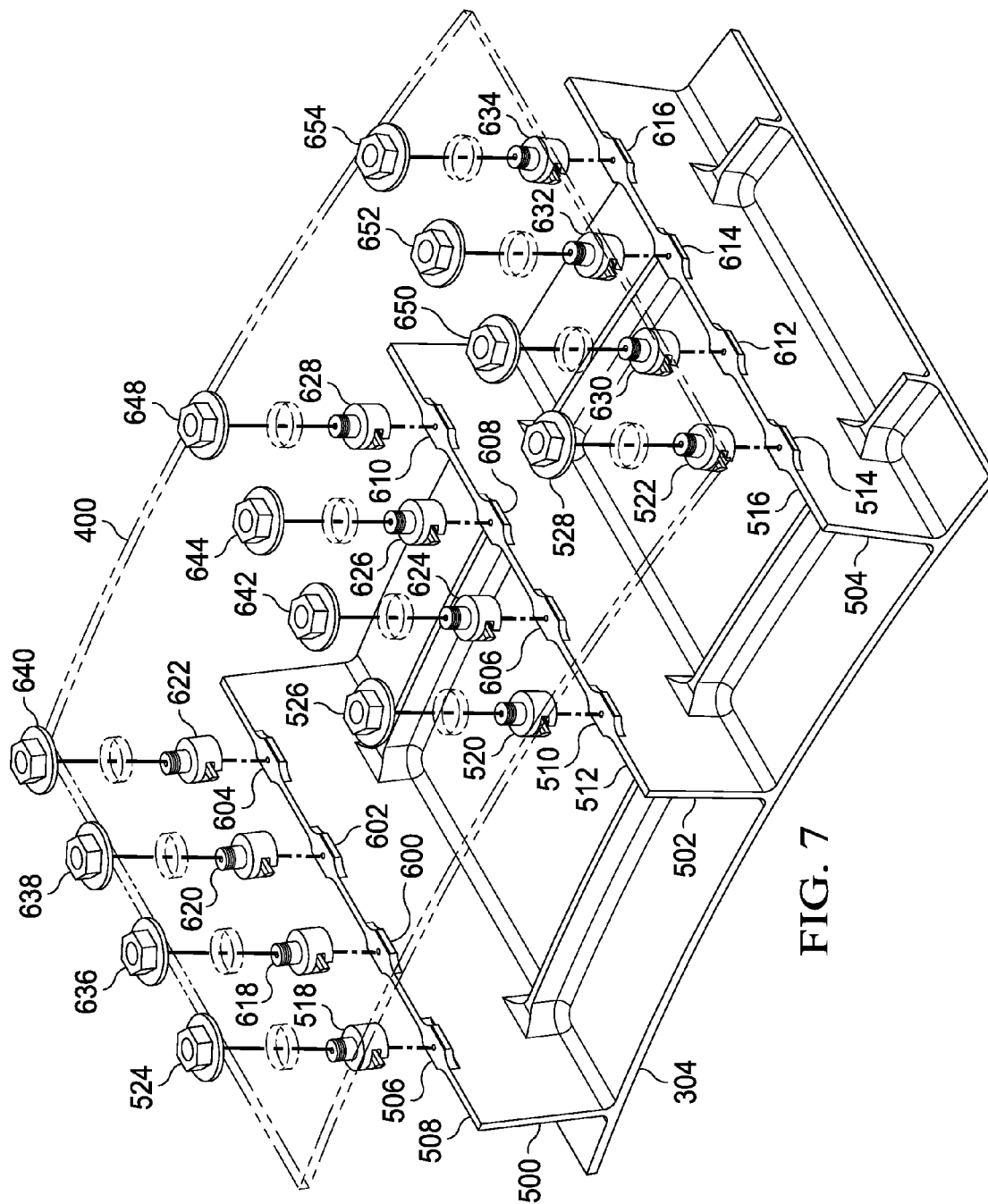


FIG. 7

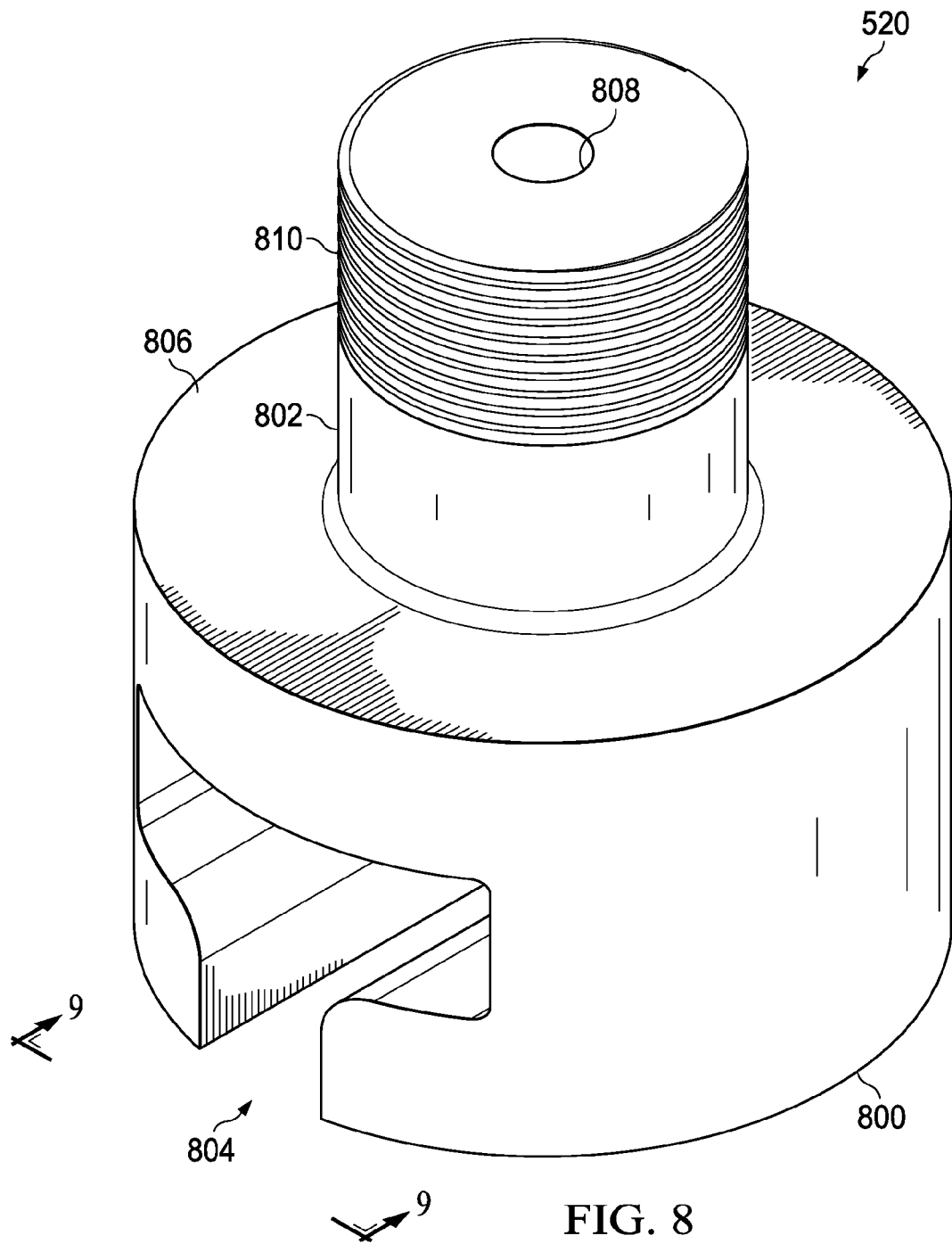


FIG. 8

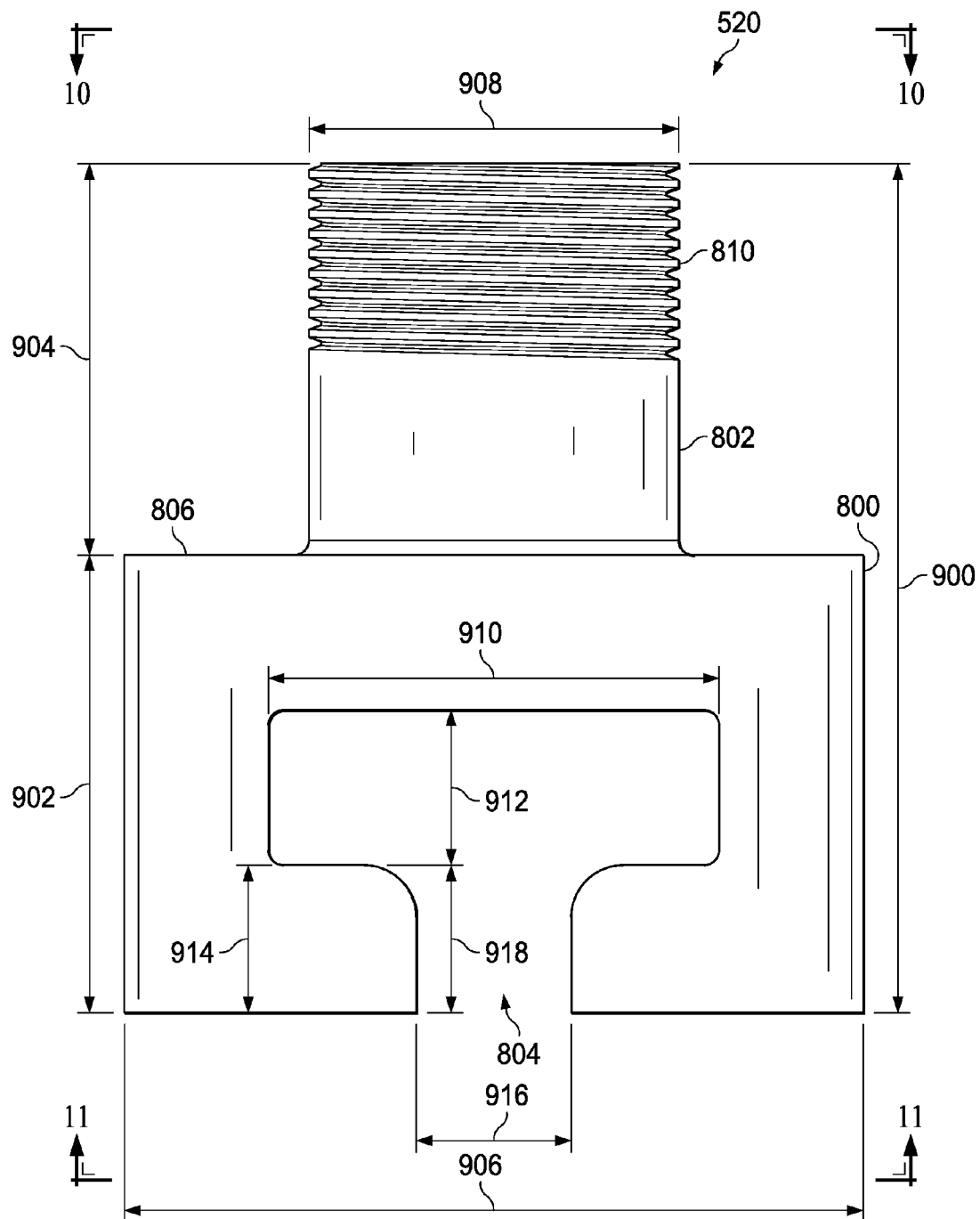


FIG. 9

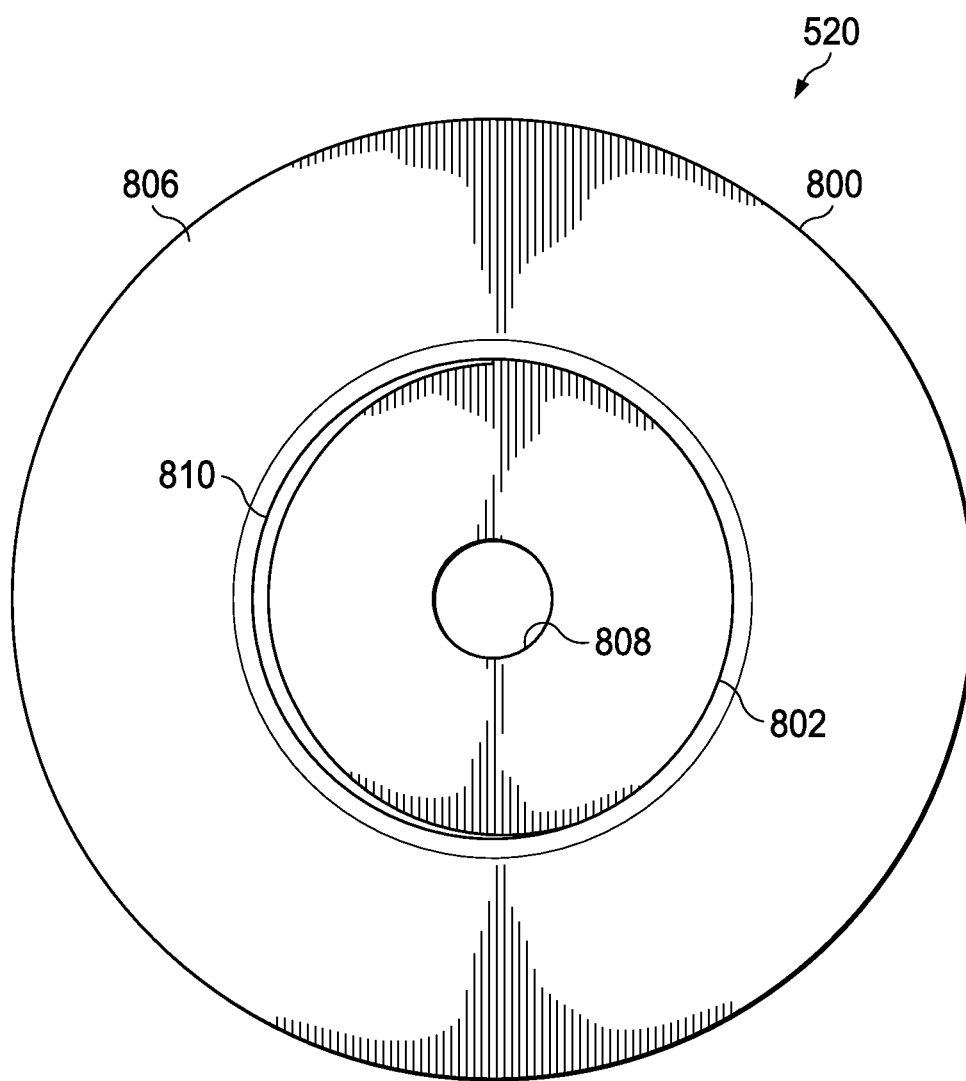


FIG. 10

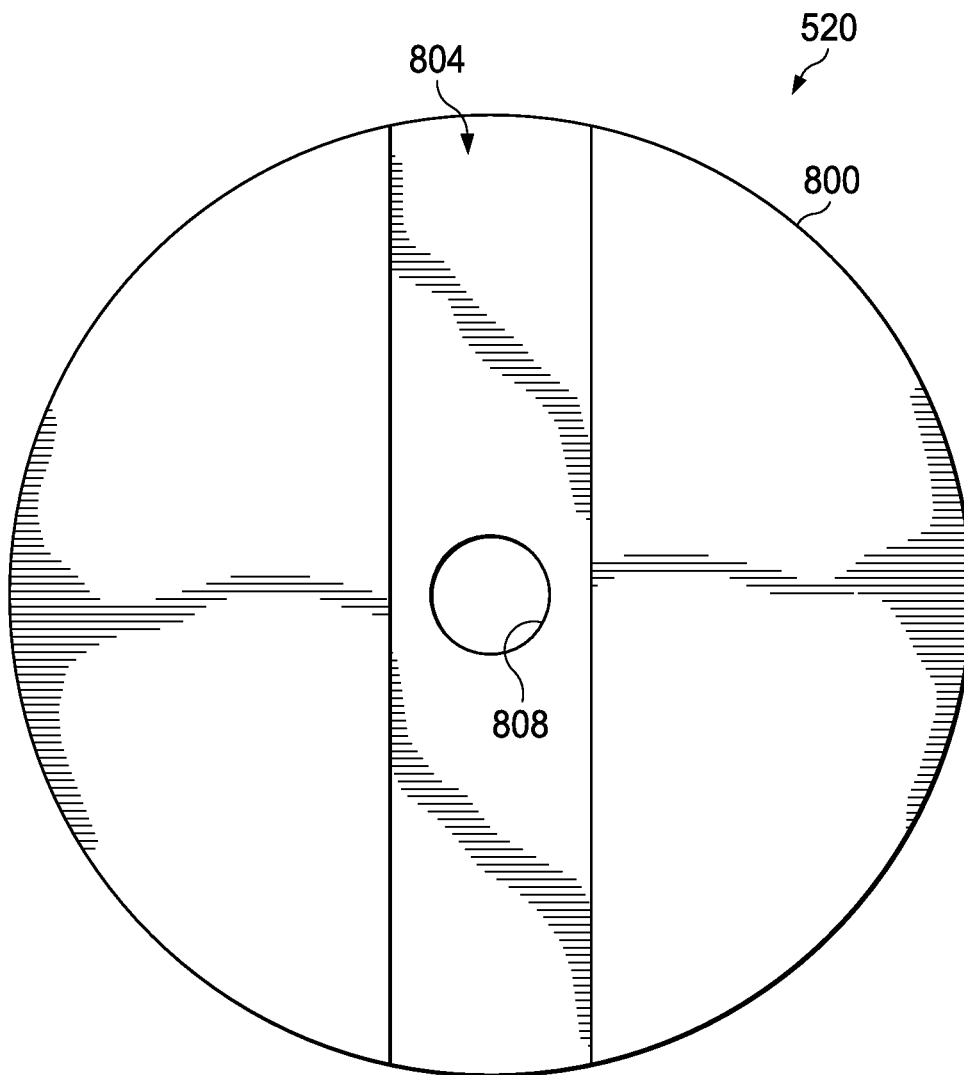


FIG. 11

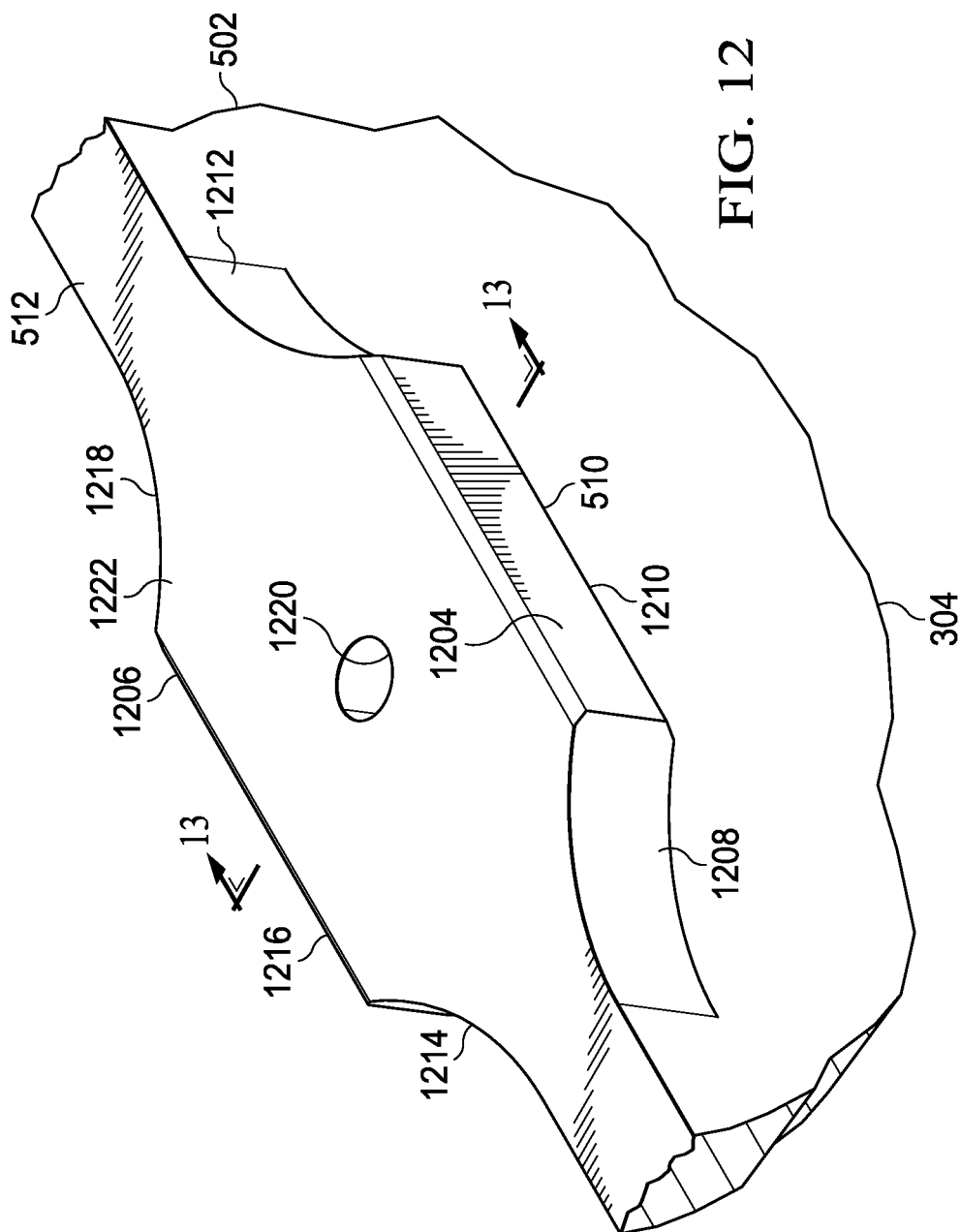


FIG. 12

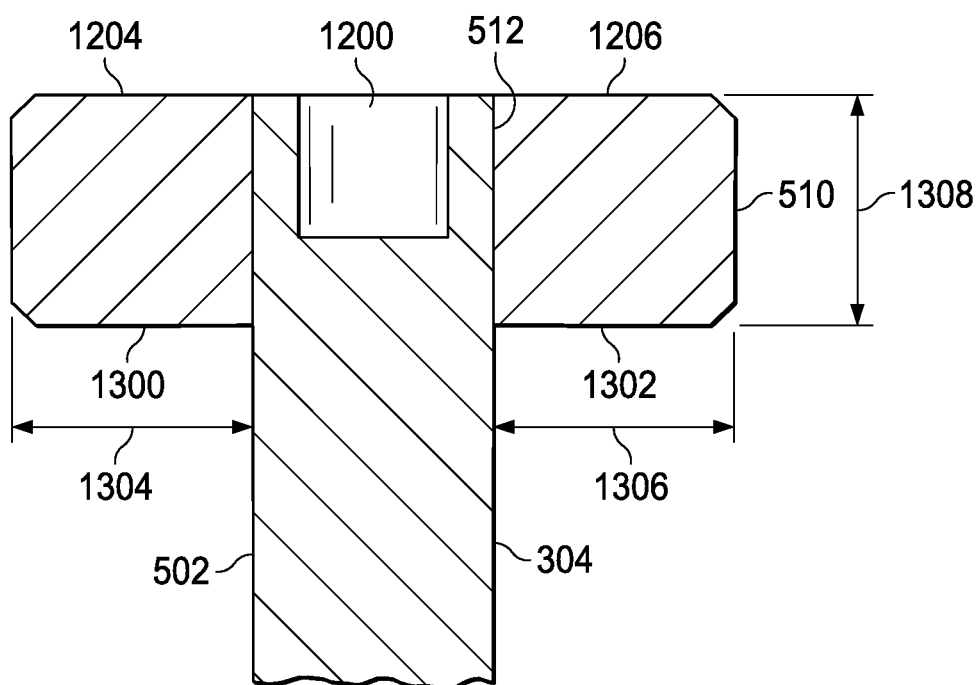


FIG. 13

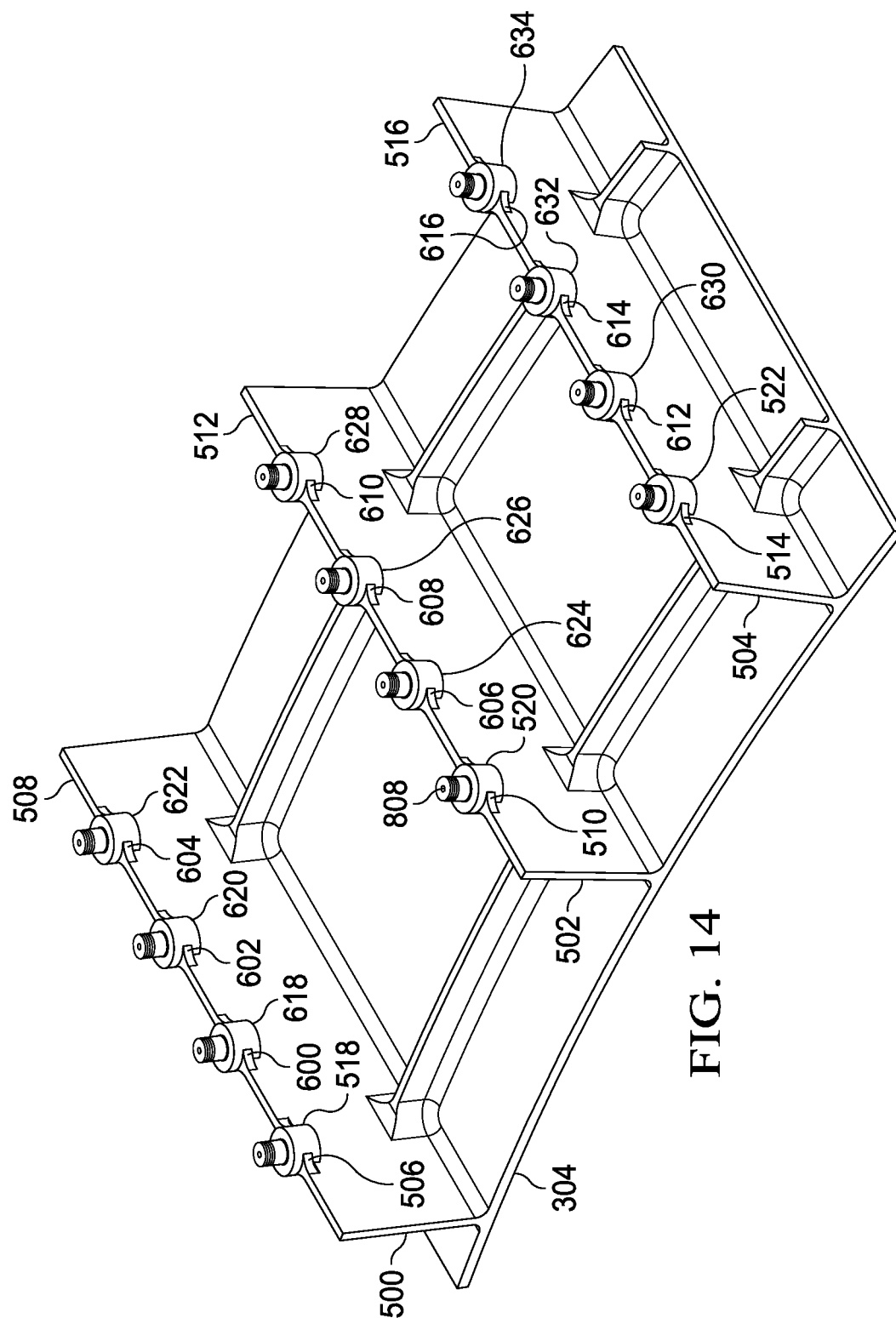


FIG. 14

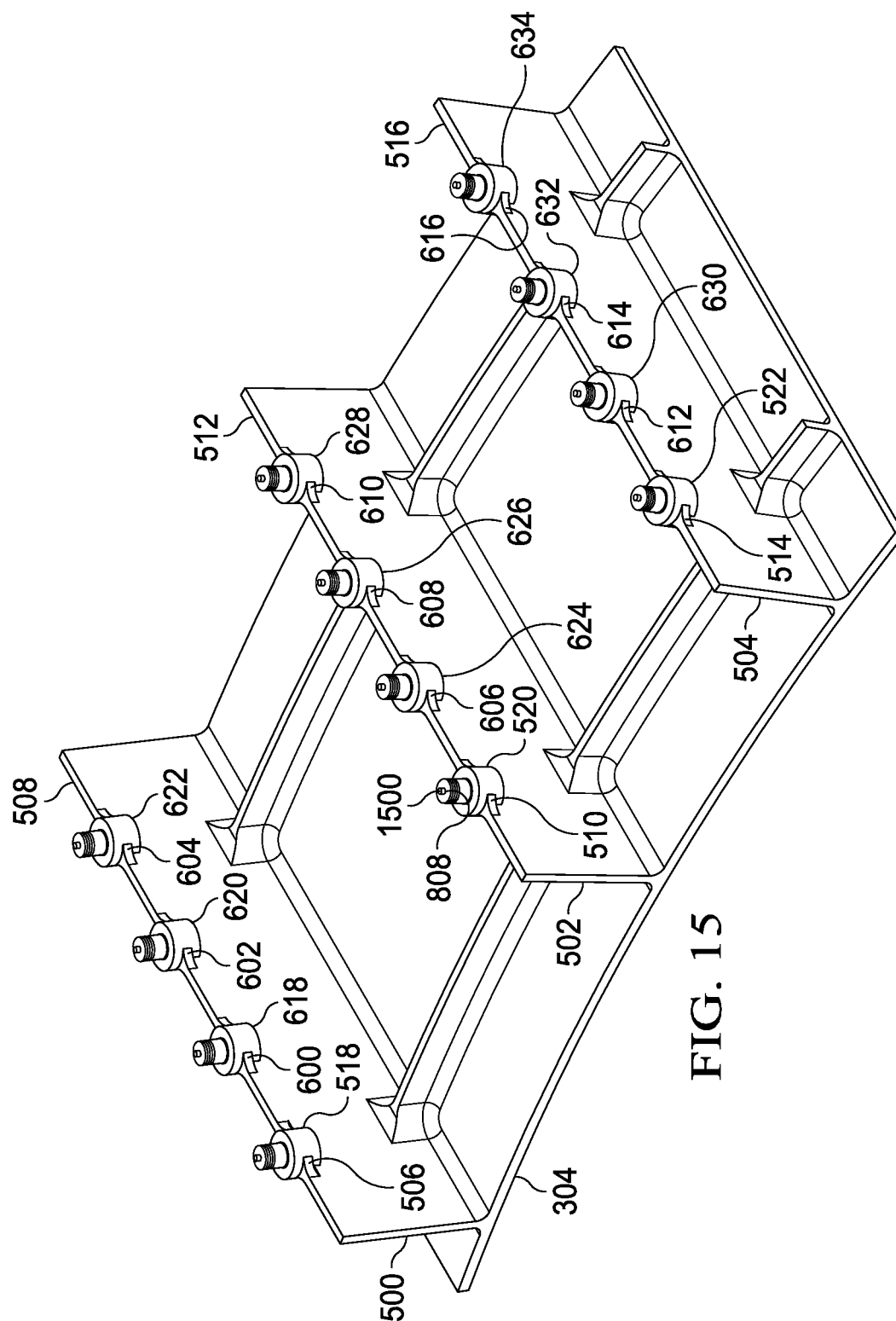


FIG. 15

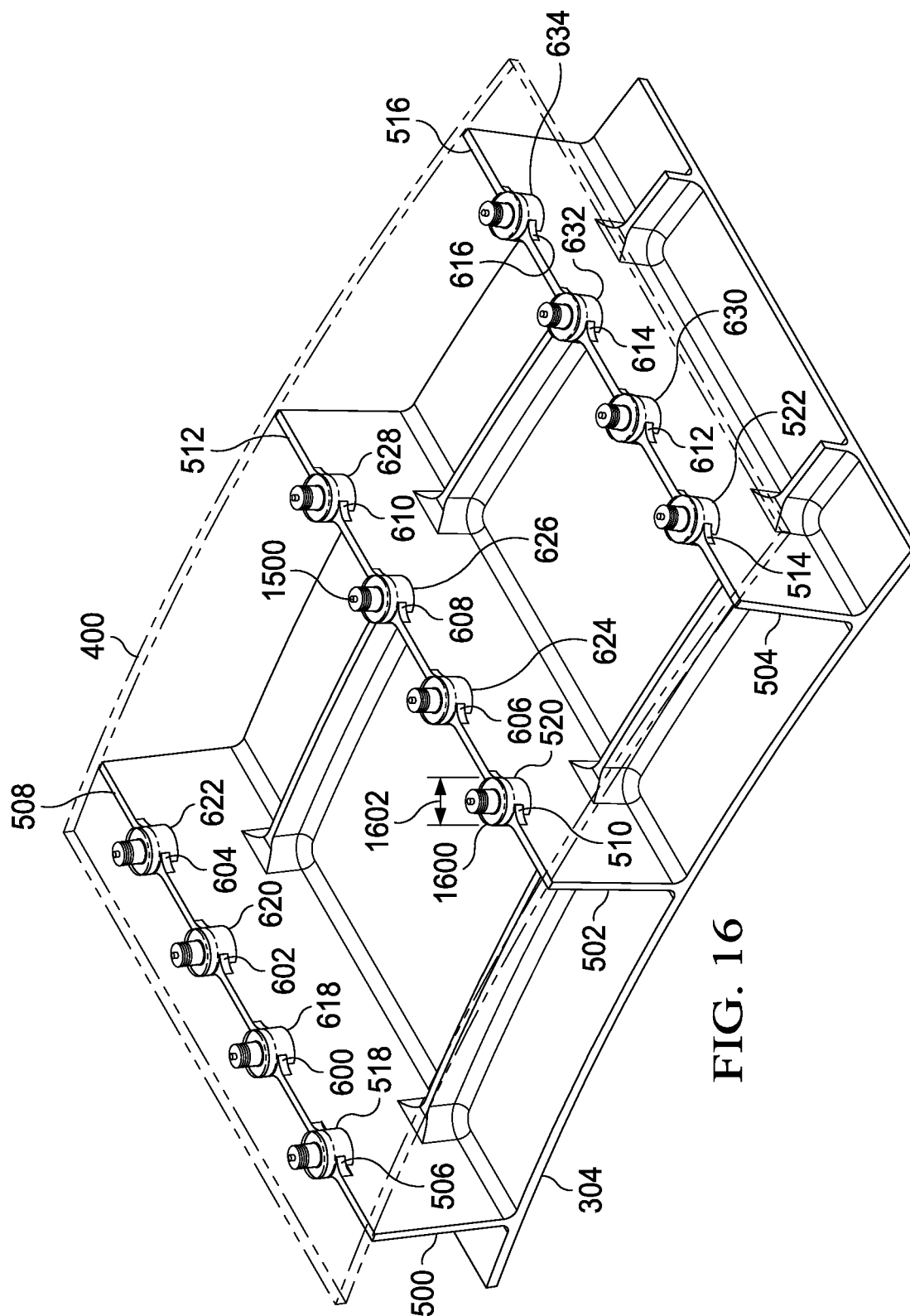


FIG. 16

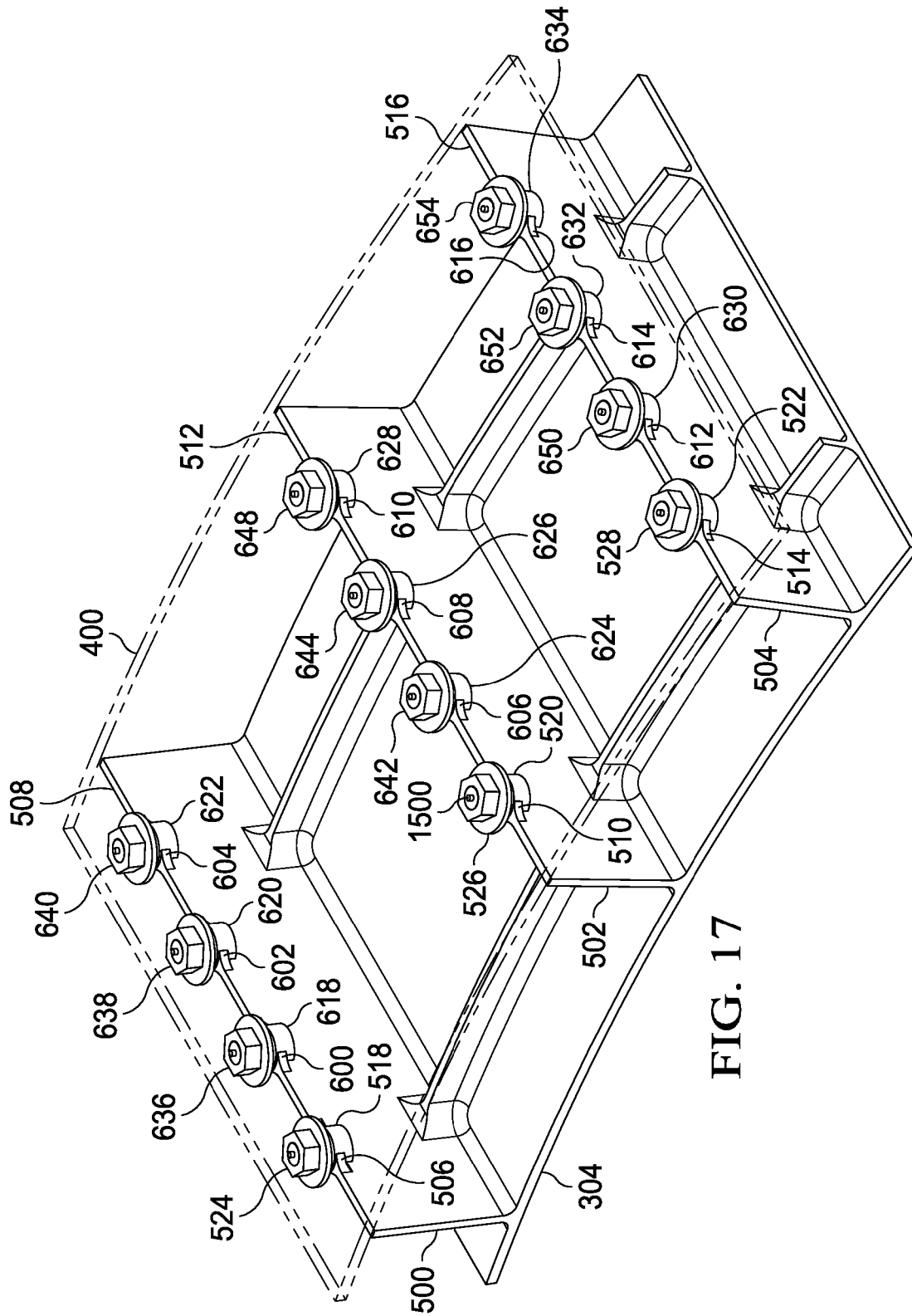


FIG. 17

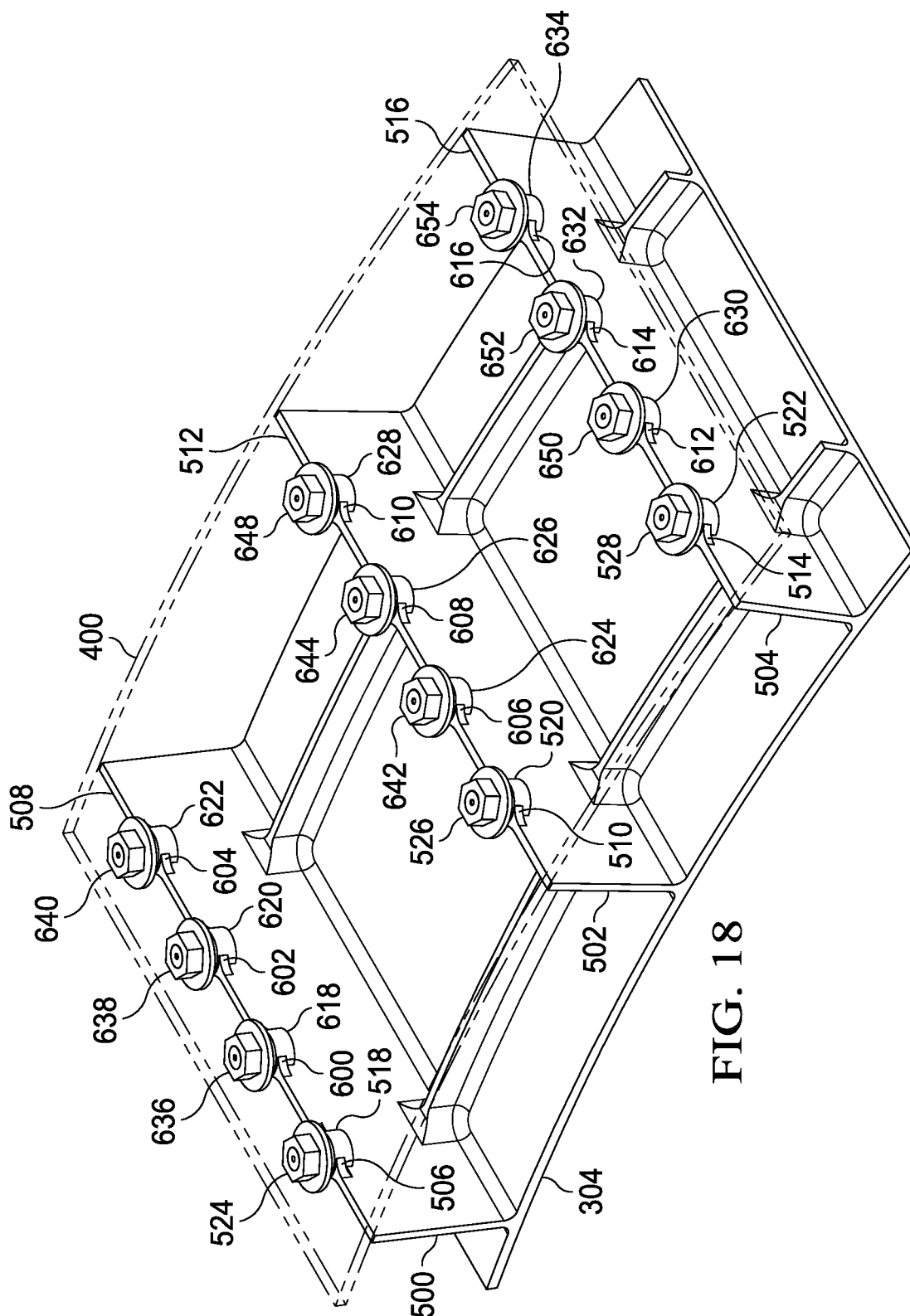


FIG. 18

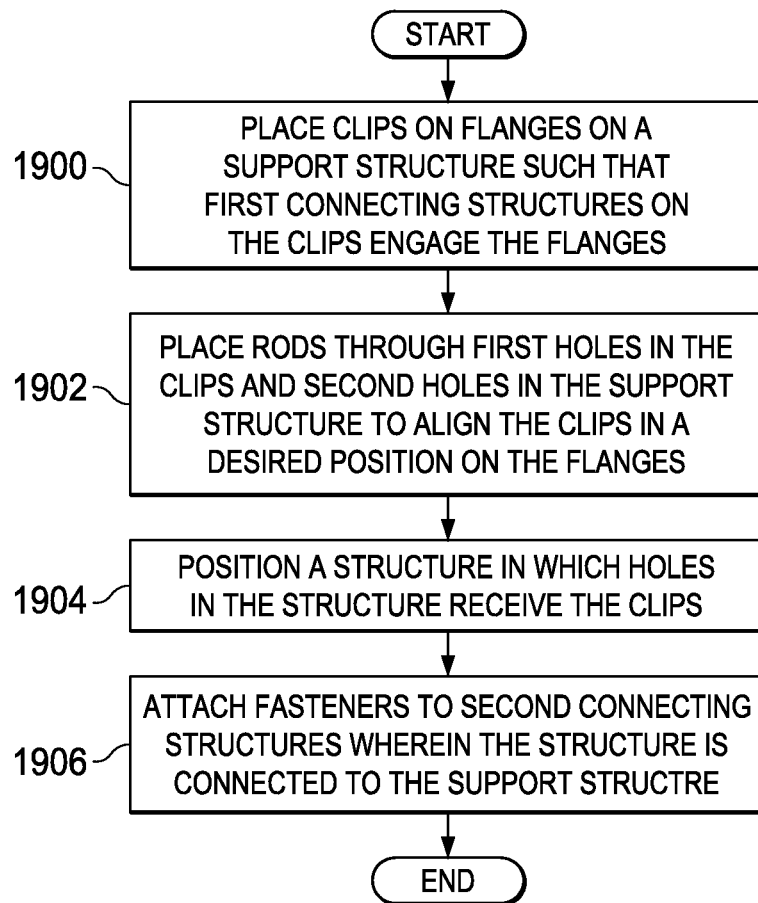
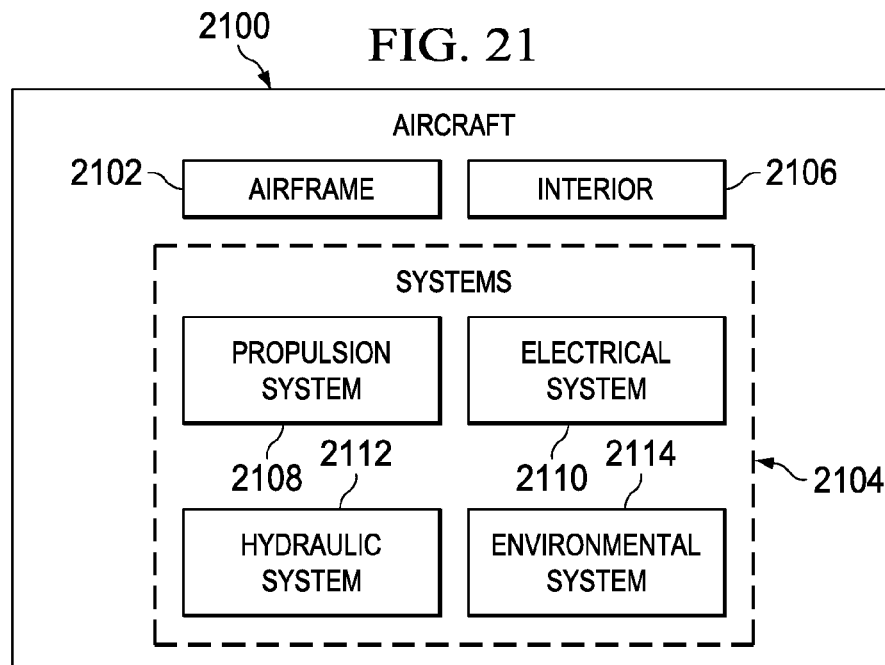
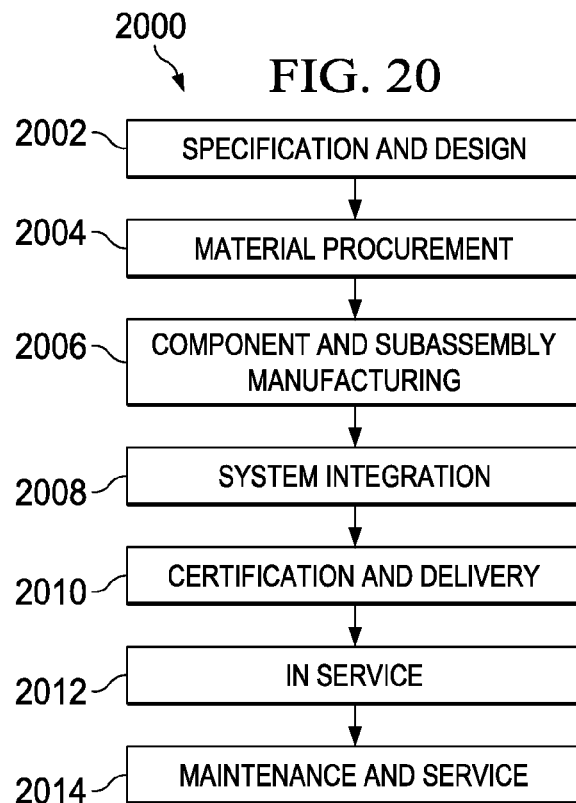


FIG. 19



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AIRCRAFT SKIN ATTACHMENT SYSTEM**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****1. Field**

The present disclosure relates generally to aircraft and, in particular, to skin panels for aircraft. Still more particularly, the present disclosure relates to a method and apparatus for attaching skin panels to an aircraft.

2. Background

An aircraft is a complex vehicle with many different parts. In manufacturing an aircraft, different components are assembled to form the aircraft. These components include, for example, electrical systems, hydraulics, monuments, engines, landing gear, skin panels, and other components.

The skin or outer surface of an aircraft may be formed in many different ways. For example, skin panels may be attached to a frame for the aircraft. The skin panels may be comprised of various materials and may have different configurations. For example, a skin panel may be a sheet of metal, a sheet of composite material, a honeycomb sandwich panel, or other suitable forms.

Attaching a skin panel to a frame may be performed using fasteners. For example, the skin panel may be placed onto the frame. Holes may then be drilled into the skin panel and frame. Thereafter, fasteners may be installed to connect the skin panel to the frame.

The design of the frame in the use of fasteners to attach skin panels to the frame may be more expensive and difficult to install than desired.

Therefore, it would be desirable to have a method and apparatus that take into account at least some of the issues discussed above, as well as other possible issues.

SUMMARY

In one illustrative embodiment, an apparatus comprises a support structure, a flange, and a clip. The flange extends in a substantially orthogonal direction from an edge of the support structure. The clip has a first connecting structure configured to receive the flange and a second connecting structure configured to be connected to a second structure.

In another illustrative embodiment, a skin panel attachment system comprises a frame, flanges, a number of clips, a skin panel, and fasteners. The flanges are formed on a number of edges of the frame. The number of clips have first connecting structures and second connecting structures. The flanges are received in channels in the first connecting structures. The skin panels have holes. The second connecting structures are received in the holes. The fasteners are connected to the second connecting structures. The skin panel is connected to the frame.

In yet another illustrative embodiment, a method for connecting structures is presented. Clips are placed on flanges on a support structure such that first connecting structures on the clips engage the flanges. A second structure is positioned. The clips are received in holes in the second structure. Fasteners are attached to second connecting structures. The second structure is connected to the support structure.

In still another illustrative embodiment, a method for operating an aircraft is presented. The aircraft is flown. A skin panel is held on a support structure. The support structure has flanges on a number of edges of the support structure. First connecting structures on clips are connected to the flanges. The skin panel is positioned such that the clips are received in

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holes in the skin panel. Fasteners are attached to the second connecting structures such that the support structure holds the skin panel.

The features and functions can be achieved independently in various embodiments of the present disclosure or may be combined in yet other embodiments in which further details can be seen with reference to the following description and drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The novel features believed characteristic of the illustrative embodiments are set forth in the appended claims. The illustrative embodiments, however, as well as a preferred mode of use, further objectives and features thereof, will best be understood by reference to the following detailed description of an illustrative embodiment of the present disclosure when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1 is an illustration of an aircraft in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 2 is an illustration of a block diagram of an attachment system in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 3 is an illustration of an aircraft engine in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 4 is an illustration of a cross-sectional view of an engine for an aircraft in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 5 is an illustration of a cross-sectional view of a frame with a skin panel for an outlet in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 6 is an illustration of a perspective view of a frame with a skin panel in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 7 is an illustration of an exploded view of a frame with a skin panel for an outlet in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 8 is an illustration of a clip in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 9 is an illustration of a clip in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 10 is another illustration of a clip in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 11 is another illustration of a clip in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 12 is an illustration of a flange on a support structure in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 13 is an illustration of a cross-sectional view of a flange in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 14 is an illustration of a frame with clips in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 15 is an illustration of clips aligned on flanges in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 16 is an illustration of a skin panel placed on a frame in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 17 is an illustration of a skin panel connected to a frame in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 18 is another illustration of a skin panel connected to a frame in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 19 is an illustration of a flowchart of a process for connecting a structure in accordance with an illustrative embodiment;

FIG. 20 is an illustration of an aircraft manufacturing and service method in the form of a block diagram in accordance with an illustrative embodiment; and

FIG. 21 is an illustration of an aircraft in the form of a block diagram in which an illustrative embodiment may be implemented.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The illustrative embodiments recognize and take into account one or more different considerations. The illustrative embodiments recognize and take into account that attaching skin panels to different portions of an aircraft may be more difficult than desired.

For example, the illustrative embodiments recognize and take into account that attaching skin panels to the engine of an aircraft may be more difficult than in other areas. For example, the outlet portion of an engine for an aircraft may be subjected to much larger amounts of heat compared to other portions of the aircraft. The outlet portion of an aircraft may have a frame comprised of a metal such as titanium, inconel, or other materials that are suitable for use in temperature encountered at the outlet.

The illustrative embodiments recognize and take into account that fasteners may be installed in the frame of the output. Cutting in the frame for a fastener may be more difficult and is typically not performed because the strength of the frame may not be as great as desired when the frame is comprised of titanium. Threads that are cut into a metallic structure are considered stress risers and may not provide a desired level of performance for the metallic structure when tested. Threads cut in titanium may require greater tolerances in the design of the frame to take into account potential inconsistencies from openings with threads in which fasteners are installed to connect skin panels.

The illustrative embodiments also recognize and take into account that return flanges may be machined on the frame of an aircraft. A return flange is a flange that extends from an edge of a structure that is over a base portion of a structure. The return flange may hang over the base portion to form a pocket. The return flange on a web connected to the base portion may have an I shape.

The return flanges may be formed by machining the material used to form the frame. Holes may be drilled in the top of the return flanges and fasteners may be installed through the holes to connect the skin panel to the frame. To meet a desired performance, a flange may be required to extend away from the frame for some selected distance. As this distance increases, the manufacturing of the frame becomes more expensive and difficult.

Thus, the illustrative embodiments provide a method and apparatus for connecting skin panels to a frame of an aircraft. The illustrative embodiments may be applied to any structure that is connected to the support structure. In one illustrative embodiment, an apparatus comprises a support structure, a flange, and a clip. The flange extends in a substantially orthogonal direction from an edge of the support structure. The clip has a first connecting structure configured to receive the flange and a second connecting structure configured to be connected to a structure.

With reference now to the figures, and in particular, with reference to FIG. 1, an illustration of an aircraft is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, aircraft 100 has wing 102 and wing 104 attached to body 106. Aircraft 100 includes engine 108 attached to wing 102 and engine 110 attached to wing 104.

Body 106 has tail section 112. Horizontal stabilizer 114, horizontal stabilizer 116, and vertical stabilizer 118 are attached to tail section 112 of body 106.

Aircraft 100 is an example of an aircraft in which an attachment system may be implemented to connect structures to each other in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. The attachment system may be used to attach a structure to a support structure. In particular, an illustrative embodiment may be used to attach skin panels to aircraft 100. In this manner, the attachment system may be a skin panel attachment system in this illustrative embodiment.

With reference now to FIG. 2, an illustration of a block diagram of an attachment system is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this depicted example, attachment system 200 may be in platform 202. The pictorial illustration of aircraft 100 in FIG. 1 is an example of platform 202.

In this illustrative example, attachment system 200 may be skin panel 204. As depicted, attachment system 200 includes support structure 206, flanges 208, clips 210, fasteners 212, and structure 214.

As depicted, support structure 206 is a structure configured to be connected to other structures, such as structure 214. Support structure 206 may hold structure 214 in place when structure 214 is connected to support structure 206.

In the illustrative example, support structure 206 may be, for example, frame 216 to which structure 214 may be connected. Support structure 206 may be, for example, selected from one of a rib, a spar, a stringer, and other suitable types of structures. In the illustrative example, support structure 206 may be comprised of different types of materials. For example, support structure 206 may be comprised of a material selected from one of titanium, aluminum, steel, plastic, a composite material, a metal, polycarbonate, or other suitable materials.

In the illustrative example, structure 214 may take different forms. For example, structure 214 may be selected from one of a skin panel, a floor panel, a wall panel, a honeycomb structure or other suitable structures. Structure 214 may be comprised of various materials. For example, structure 214 may include a material selected from one of titanium, aluminum, steel, plastic, a composite material, a metal, a polycarbonate, or other suitable types of materials.

Flanges 208 are formed on a number of edges 218 on support structure 206. As used herein, a "number of," when used with reference to items, means one or more items. For example, a number of edges 218 is one or more of edges 218.

As depicted, flanges 208 may have first sides 222 and second sides 224 extending from a number of edges 218. In particular, first sides 222 extend in an opposite direction from second sides 224 from the number of edges 218. In other words, T shapes 226 are formed by flanges 208 on the number of edges 218 of support structure 206.

In this illustrative example, first sides 222 and second sides 224 have substantially the same lengths. By having flanges 208 with two sides extending from the number of edges 218, the length of these two sides is shorter than having a single side extending one direction from the number of edges 218.

As depicted, clips 210 may be placed on flanges 208 on support structure 206. As depicted, clips 210 have first connecting structures 228 and second connecting structures 230.

First connecting structures 228 for clips 210 may engage flanges 208. For example, first connecting structures 228 have channels 232 configured to receive flanges 208.

In the illustrative example, second connecting structures 230 for clips 210 are configured to be connected to structure 214. Second connecting structures 230 are configured to receive fasteners 212 to connect structure 214 to support structure 206. In this example, fasteners 212 may be nuts.

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Fasteners **212** may also take other forms such as pins, cotter pins, or other suitable devices in other illustrative examples.

In particular, structure **214** may have holes **246**. Holes **246** may receive first connecting structures **228** and second connecting structures **230** with fasteners **212** being attached to second connecting structures **230**. In other words, each opening in holes **246** may have a size and dimensions configured to receive all of a clip in clips **210**. As a result, structure **214** is connected to support structure **206** using clips **210**.

Additionally, in some illustrative examples, attachment system **200** also may include rods **250**. For example, clips **210** may have first openings **252** in second connecting structures **230** and support structure **206** may have second openings **254**. Rods **250** are configured to be placed through first openings **252** and second openings **254** and align clips **210** with flanges **208** in desired positions. In other words, first openings **252** and second openings **254** are configured to receive rods **250** such that clips **210** are aligned with flanges **208** at a desired position. Rods **250** may be removed or left in place after structure **214** is connected to support structure **206** using fasteners **212**.

The illustration of attachment system **200** in FIG. 2 is not meant to imply physical or architectural limitations to the manner in which an illustrative embodiment may be implemented. Other components in addition to or in place of the ones illustrated may be used. Some components may be unnecessary. Also, the blocks are presented to illustrate some functional components. One or more of these blocks may be combined, divided, or combined and divided into different blocks when implemented in an illustrative embodiment.

For example, although attachment system **200** has been described as a system for use with aircraft **100** in FIG. 1, the illustrative examples may be used to attach structures to support structures in other types of platforms other than aircraft **100**. The platform may be, for example, a mobile platform, a stationary platform, a land-based structure, an aquatic-based structure, and a space-based structure. More specifically, the platform, may be a surface ship, a tank, a personnel carrier, a train, a spacecraft, a space station, a satellite, a submarine, an automobile, a power plant, a bridge, a dam, a house, a manufacturing facility, a building, and other suitable platforms.

In another illustrative example, attachment system **200** may omit some components listed. For example, attachment system **200** may exclude support structure **206**, structure **214**, or both. These structures may be considered ones that are connected by attachment system **200** rather than part of attachment system **200**.

With reference now to FIG. 3, an illustration of an aircraft engine is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, a more detailed illustration of engine **110** on aircraft **100** in FIG. 1 is shown.

Engine **110** is an example of a structure on which skin panels may be attached using attachment system **200** in FIG. 2. For example, outlet **300** includes skin panels **302** and frame **304**. Skin panels **302** are examples of an implementation for structure **214** and frame **304** is an example of an implementation for support structure **206** in FIG. 2.

With reference now to FIG. 4, an illustration of a cross-sectional view of an engine for an aircraft is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, a cross-sectional view of engine **110** is seen taken along lines 4-4 in FIG. 3. As can be seen in this example, skin panel **400** in skin panels **302** is shown on frame **304**.

Turning now to FIG. 5, an illustration of a cross-sectional view of a frame with a skin panel for an outlet is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative

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example, a cross-sectional view of skin panel **400** on frame **304** on outlet **300** on engine **110** is shown taken along lines 5-5 in FIG. 4.

In this view, frame **304** has rib **500**, rib **502**, and rib **504**. Flange **506** extends in a substantially orthogonal direction from edge **508** of rib **500** on frame **304** to form a T shape. In a similar fashion, flange **510** extends from edge **512** on rib **502**, and flange **514** extends from edge **516** on rib **504**. Flange **506**, flange **510**, and flange **514** may be return flanges in the illustrative examples.

As depicted, frame **304** with rib **500**, rib **502**, and rib **504** is described as an example of support structure **206** in FIG. 2. In some illustrative examples, rib **500**, rib **502**, and rib **504** may be considered to be support structures.

In the illustrative example, clip **518**, clip **520**, and clip **522** are used to connect skin panel **400** to frame **304** with fastener **524**, fastener **526**, and fastener **528**. As can be seen in this illustrative example, clip **518** is engaged with flange **506**; clip **520** is engaged with flange **510**; and clip **522** is engaged with flange **514**.

Skin panel **400** is engaged with clip **518**, clip **520**, and clip **522**. Fastener **524**, fastener **526**, and fastener **528** are then connected to clip **518**, clip **520**, and clip **522**, respectively, to connect skin panel **400** to frame **304**.

With reference now to FIG. 6, an illustration of a perspective view of a frame with a skin panel is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustration, a perspective view of the portion of frame **304** with skin panel **400** from the cross-sectional view in FIG. 5 is shown.

In this view, skin panel **400** is shown as being translucent to provide a better view of the different components in the attachment system used to attach skin panel **400** to frame **304**. As depicted, rib **500** on frame **304** also has flange **600**, flange **602**, and flange **604** in addition to flange **506**. Rib **502** also has flange **606**, flange **608**, and flange **610** in addition to flange **510**. Rib **504** also has flange **612**, flange **614**, and flange **616** in addition to flange **514**.

In this view, clip **618** is engaged with flange **600**; clip **620** is engaged with flange **602**; and clip **622** is engaged with flange **604** on rib **500**. Clip **624** is engaged with flange **606**; clip **626** is engaged with flange **608**; and clip **628** is engaged with flange **610** on rib **502**. In a similar fashion, clip **630** is engaged with flange **612**; clip **632** is engaged with flange **614**; and clip **634** is engaged with flange **616** on rib **504**.

As depicted, additional fasteners are also present in addition to fastener **524**, fastener **526**, and fastener **528**. In this illustrative example, fastener **636** is connected to clip **618**; fastener **638** is connected to clip **620**; fastener **640** is connected to clip **622**; fastener **642** is connected to clip **624**; fastener **644** is connected to clip **626**; fastener **648** is connected to clip **628**; fastener **650** is connected to clip **630**; fastener **652** is connected to clip **632**; and fastener **654** is connected to clip **634**.

With reference now to FIG. 7, an illustration of an exploded view of a frame with a skin panel for an outlet is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. As depicted, an exploded view of frame **304**, skin panel **400**, and the other component used to connect skin panel **400** to frame **304** are shown.

Turning now to FIG. 8, an illustration of a clip is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. A more detailed view of clip **520** in FIG. 5 is shown in a perspective view.

As can be seen, clip **520** has first connecting structure **800** and second connecting structure **802**. First connecting structure **800** has a cylindrical shape. Additionally, first connecting structure **800** has channel **804**. In this illustrative example,

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channel **804** is configured to receive flange **510** from FIGS. 5-7. Channel **804** has a configuration to allow flange **510** to be inserted within channel **804**. In some cases, channel **804** may have dimensions that may allow for an interference fit to occur between first connecting structure **800** and flange **510**.

Second connecting structure **802** has a cylindrical shape. Second connecting structure **802** extends from surface **806** of first connecting structure **800**. Second connecting structure **802** in clip **520** has first opening **808** in this example. Additionally, second connecting structure **802** also includes threads **810**. Threads **810** are configured to engage threads in fastener **526** from FIGS. 5-7 when fastener **526** is connected to second connecting structure **802**.

Clip **520** may be comprised of one or more types of materials. For example, clip **520** may be comprised of titanium, aluminum, steel, plastic, composite material, a metal, polycarbonate, or other suitable materials.

Turning now to FIG. 9, an illustration of a clip is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this figure, clip **520** is seen in a view taken in the direction of lines 9-9 in FIG. 8. In this view, a better view of channel **804** is shown. As can be seen, the shape of channel **804** conforms to a cross-sectional shape of flange **510** from FIGS. 5-7.

As can be seen in this view, clip **520** has height **900**. First connecting structure **800** has height **902**. Second connecting structure **802** has height **904**. Additionally, first connecting structure **800** has diameter **906** and second connecting structure **802** has diameter **908**. Channel **804** has width **910** and height **912**. Further, portion **914** channel **804** also may have width **916** and height **918**.

In one illustrative example, height **900** is about 0.575 inches, height **902** is about 0.300 inches, and height **904** is about 0.275 inches. Diameter **906** is about 0.500 inches and diameter **908** is about 0.250 inches. Width **910** is about 0.305 inches and height **912** is about 0.105 inches.

With respect to channel **804**, width **910** is about 0.305 inches and height **912** is about 0.105 inches. In portion **914**, width **916** is about 0.100 inches and height **918** is about 0.105 inches. Of course, these values may vary depending on the particular implementation.

With reference now to FIG. 10, another illustration of a clip is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this figure, another view of clip **520** is shown from a view taken in the direction of lines 10-10 in FIG. 9.

In this view, first opening **808** is seen in second connecting structure **802**. First opening **808** may receive an elongate structure such as a rod in rods **250** in FIG. 2.

Turning now to FIG. 11, another illustration of a clip is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this figure, another view of clip **520** is shown from a view taken in the direction of lines 11-11 in FIG. 9.

In this view, channel **804** is seen in first connecting structure **800**. First opening **808** also is seen in this view as extending through second connecting structure **802** from FIGS. 8-10 into channel **804**.

The illustrations of clip **520** in FIGS. 8-11 are not meant to limit the manner in which clips **210** shown in block form in FIG. 2 may be implemented. For example, first connecting structure **800** is shown as having a cross section with a circular shape. In other illustrative examples, first connecting structure **800** may have other shapes such as an egg shape, an oval shape, a rectangular shape, or some other suitable shape.

Turning now to FIG. 12, an illustration of a flange on a support structure is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. A more detailed illustration of flange **510** on rib **502** on frame **304** is shown. In this example, flange **510** extends substantially orthogonally to rib **502** on edge **512**.

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Flange **510** has first side **1204** and second side **1206**. First side **1204** extends substantially orthogonally from edge **512** and second side **1206** also extends substantially orthogonally from edge **512**.

First side **1204** has curved section **1208**, planar section **1210**, and curved section **1212**. In a similar fashion, second side **1206** has curved section **1214**, planar section **1216**, and curved section **1218**.

In this illustrative example, second opening **1220** is shown in surface **1222** of flange **510** at edge **512** of rib **502**. Second opening **1220** may be aligned with first opening **808** in clip **520** from FIGS. 8-11. This alignment of first opening **808** and second opening **1220** may be used to align clip **520** on flange **510** in a desired position. These openings may also be referred to as holes. For example, first opening **808** and second opening **1220** may be alignment holes used to align clip **520** with flange **510** in a desired position.

Turning now to FIG. 13, an illustration of a cross-sectional view of a flange is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, a cross-sectional view of flange **510** taken along lines 13-13 in FIG. 12 is shown.

In this view, flange **510** on edge **512** of rib **502** forms a T shape. As can be seen in this illustrative example, flange **510** has first side **1204** and second side **1206**. First side **1204** has length **1304** and second side **1206** has length **1306**. Flange **510** has height **1308**.

Length **1304** and length **1306** are substantially the same length in this illustrative example. In this manner, the formation of flange **510** using machining operations may be reduced in terms of time and cost because the equal length of first side **1204** and second side **1206** reduces the length as compared to a flange having one side longer than the other side in this illustrative example. In other words, the overhang of first side **1204** and second side **1206** may be reduced as compared to when a flange only extends in one direction from edge **512**.

The values for length **1304**, length **1306**, and height **1308** may vary depending on the particular implementation. These values may be selected based on the dimensions for channel **804** in second connecting structure **802** in clip **520** from FIGS. 8-11. The values may be selected such that flange **510** may be received within channel **804** with a desired fit. In some cases, the fit may be an interference fit.

The illustration of flange **510** in FIG. 12 and FIG. 13 is only one example of a flange in flanges **208** shown in block form in FIG. 2. This illustration of flange **510** is not meant to limit the manner in which other flanges may be implemented in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. Additionally, although flange **510** is described as having first side **1204** and second side **1206**, other illustrative examples may describe these sides as being separate flanges extending from edge **512**.

With reference now to FIGS. 14-18, illustrations of processes for connecting a structure to a support structure are depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. The process illustrated in this example is performed to connect skin panel **400** to frame **304**.

With reference first to FIG. 14, an illustration of a frame with clips is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this figure, clips are attached to the flanges. In particular, clips may be moved or positioned such that the channels in the clips receive the flanges in frame **304**.

With reference now to FIG. 15, an illustration of clips aligned on flanges is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this example, rods have been installed in the openings in the clips and the openings in the flanges to

align the clips. These openings may be referred to alignment holes in the illustrative examples.

For example, rod **1500** may be placed into first opening **808** in clip **520** and second opening **1220** (not shown in this view) in flange **510**. By placing rod **1500** through first opening **808** and second opening **1220**, clip **520** may be aligned in a desired position relative to flange **510**. In other words, clip **520** may be aligned in a position over flange **510** in the illustrative example. Rod **1500** may add some strength to counteract a sheer force if left in first opening **808** and second opening **1220**.

Turning now to FIG. **16**, an illustration of a skin panel placed on a frame is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. As depicted, skin panel **400** is placed onto frame **304**.

Skin panel **400** has holes configured to receive the clips. For example, hole **1600** has diameter **1602**. Diameter **1602** has a value that allows for hole **1600** to receive clip **520**. In particular, diameter **1602** has a value that is about or greater than diameter **908** of second connecting structure **802** in clip **520** in FIG. **9**. In this manner, skin panel **400** may contact edge **508** of rib **500**, edge **512** of rib **502**, and edge **516** of rib **504**.

Turning now to FIG. **17**, an illustration of a skin panel connected to a frame is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, fasteners have been connected to the clips with skin panel **400** in place on frame **304**.

Next, in FIG. **18**, another illustration of a skin panel connected to a frame is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. In this illustrative example, the rods have been removed from the clips. In other illustrative examples, the rods may be left in place depending on the particular implementation.

The illustrations of the process for connecting a skin panel to a frame in FIGS. **14-18** are only meant as examples and not meant to limit the manner in which skin panel **400** may be connected to frame **304**. For example, instead of installing all of the clips followed by inserting rods, a clip may be installed and a rod may be inserted to align the clip before installing another clip.

As another illustrative example, an adhesive, a sealant, or some other material may be placed on the edges of the ribs prior to placing skin panel **400** on frame **304**. In still other illustrative examples, an adhesive may be placed on the flanges or on the channels of the clips prior to placing the clips on frame **304** to engage the flanges.

The different components shown in FIG. **1** and FIGS. **3-18** may be combined with components in FIG. **2**, used with components in FIG. **2**, or a combination of the two. Additionally, some of the components in FIG. **1** and FIGS. **3-18** may be illustrative examples of how components shown in block form in FIG. **2** can be implemented as physical structures.

Turning now to FIG. **19**, an illustration of flowchart of a process for connecting a structure is depicted in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. The process illustrated in FIG. **19** may be implemented using attachment system **200** in FIG. **2**. In particular, the process may be used to connect structure **214** to support structure **206** in FIG. **2**. The process also may be used to connect skin panel **400** to frame **304**.

The process begins by placing clips on flanges on a support structure such that first connecting structures on the clips engage the flanges (operation **1900**). The process places rods through first holes in the clips and second holes in the support structure to align the clips in a desired position on the flanges

(operation **1902**). The process then positions a structure in which holes in the structure receive the clips (operation **1904**).

The process then attaches fasteners to second connecting structures wherein the structure is connected to the support structure (operation **1906**). The process terminates thereafter.

The flowcharts and block diagrams in the different depicted embodiments illustrate the architecture, functionality, and operation of some possible implementations of apparatuses and methods in an illustrative embodiment. In this regard, each block in the flowcharts or block diagrams may represent a module, a segment, a function, and/or a portion of an operation or step. For example, one or more of the blocks may be implemented as program code, in hardware, or a combination of the program code and hardware. When implemented in hardware, the hardware may, for example, take the form of integrated circuits that are manufactured or configured to perform one or more operations in the flowcharts or block diagrams. When implemented as a combination of program code and hardware, the implementation may take the form of firmware.

In some alternative implementations of an illustrative embodiment, the function or functions noted in the blocks may occur out of the order noted in the figures. For example, in some cases, two blocks shown in succession may be executed substantially concurrently, or the blocks may sometimes be performed in the reverse order, depending upon the functionality involved. Also, other blocks may be added in addition to the illustrated blocks in a flowchart or block diagram.

For example, operation **1902** may be omitted in some illustrative examples. Further, an additional operation may be included to remove the rods after the fasteners have been connected to the second connecting structures of the clips. As another example, adhesive or some other material may be placed in the openings prior to inserting the rods if the rods are to remain in place. In another illustrative example, the fasteners may have openings with closed ends such that when the fasteners are installed, the rods are held in place by the closed ends of the fasteners.

Illustrative embodiments of the disclosure may be described in the context of aircraft manufacturing and service method **2000** as shown in FIG. **20** and aircraft **2100** as shown in FIG. **21**. Turning first to FIG. **20**, an illustration of an aircraft manufacturing and service method is depicted in the form of a block diagram in accordance with an illustrative embodiment. During pre-production, aircraft manufacturing and service method **2000** may include specification and design **2002** of aircraft **2100** in FIG. **21** and material procurement **2004**.

During production, component and subassembly manufacturing **2006** and system integration **2008** of aircraft **2100** in FIG. **21** takes place. Thereafter, aircraft **2100** in FIG. **21** may go through certification and delivery **2010** in order to be placed in service **2012**. While in service **2012** by a customer, aircraft **2100** in FIG. **21** is scheduled for routine maintenance and service **2014**, which may include modification, reconfiguration, refurbishment, and other maintenance or service.

Each of the processes of aircraft manufacturing and service method **2000** may be performed or carried out by a system integrator, a third party, and/or an operator. In these examples, the operator may be a customer. For the purposes of this description, a system integrator may include, without limitation, any number of aircraft manufacturers and major-system subcontractors; a third party may include, without limitation, any number of vendors, subcontractors, and suppliers; and an

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operator may be an airline, a leasing company, a military entity, a service organization, and so on.

With reference now to FIG. 21, an illustration of an aircraft is depicted in the form of a block diagram in which an illustrative embodiment may be implemented. In this example, aircraft 2100 is produced by aircraft manufacturing and service method 2000 in FIG. 20 and may include airframe 2102 with plurality of systems 2104 and interior 2106. Examples of systems 2104 include one or more of propulsion system 2108, electrical system 2110, hydraulic system 2112, and environmental system 2114. Any number of other systems may be included. Although an aerospace example is shown, different illustrative embodiments may be applied to other industries, such as the automotive industry.

Apparatuses and methods embodied herein may be employed during at least one of the stages of aircraft manufacturing and service method 2000 in FIG. 20.

In one illustrative example, components or subassemblies produced in component and subassembly manufacturing 2006 in FIG. 20 may be fabricated or manufactured in a manner similar to components or subassemblies produced while aircraft 2100 is in service 2012 in FIG. 20. As yet another example, one or more apparatus embodiments, method embodiments, or a combination thereof may be utilized during production stages, such as component and subassembly manufacturing 2006 and system integration 2008 in FIG. 20. One or more apparatus embodiments, method embodiments, or a combination thereof may be utilized while aircraft 2100 is in service 2012 and/or during maintenance and service 2014 in FIG. 20. The use of a number of the different illustrative embodiments may substantially expedite the assembly of and/or reduce the cost of aircraft 2100.

In this manner, structures may be connected to each other in a manner that reduces the number of holes with threads for installing fasteners. Additionally, in an illustrative example, with the length of each side of the flange being substantially the same, the time and expense for forming structure 214 shown in block form in FIG. 2 when machining is performed may be reduced. The length of each side of the flange is smaller than when the flange extends from only one side to form an L shape and has a greater length than one of the sides when the flange extends in both directions from the edge to form a T shape. The illustrative embodiments may be especially useful when machining is performed on titanium materials to form frames on which skin panels are attached.

This type of connection may be especially useful depending on the type of materials used in the structures and support structures. For example, the illustrative examples may be implemented for connecting skin panels to support structures in an outlet of an engine for an aircraft. The aircraft may be operated or flown with the attachment system maintaining the connection between the skin panel and the support structure.

The description of the different illustrative embodiments has been presented for purposes of illustration and description, and is not intended to be exhaustive or limited to the embodiments in the form disclosed. Many modifications and variations will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art. Further, different illustrative embodiments may provide different features as compared to other illustrative embodiments. The embodiment or embodiments selected are chosen and described in order to best explain the principles of the embodiments, the practical application, and to enable others of ordinary skill in the art to understand the disclosure for various embodiments with various modifications as are suited to the particular use contemplated.

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What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus comprising:

a clip having a first connecting structure, and a second connecting structure configured to be connected to a second structure, wherein the second connecting structure comprises a first opening;

a support structure of an aerospace vehicle having an edge and a second opening along the edge into the support structure; and

a flange extending in a substantially orthogonal direction from the edge around the second opening, wherein the second opening is substantially orthogonal to the flange, wherein the first connecting structure of the clip is configured to receive the flange, and wherein the first opening and the second opening are aligned when the clip is in a desired position.

2. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising the second structure having a hole there through, wherein the second connecting structure is configured to be placed through the hole in the second structure.

3. The apparatus of claim 2, wherein the second connecting structure receives a fastener to secure the second structure to the second connecting structure.

4. The apparatus of claim 1 further comprising a rod configured to be placed through the first opening and the second opening, wherein the first opening and the second opening are receive the rod when the clip is aligned with the flange in the desired position.

5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the first connecting structure has a channel extending there through, wherein a shape of the channel conforms to a cross-sectional shape of the flange, wherein the channel is configured to receive the flange.

6. The apparatus of claim 5, wherein the first connecting structure has a cylindrical shape.

7. The apparatus of claim 5, wherein the channel is configured to receive the flange with an interference fit.

8. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the support structure further comprises an aircraft frame structure selected from one of a rib, a spar, and a stringer.

9. The apparatus of claim 3, wherein the fastener is a nut.

10. The apparatus of claim 8, wherein the support structure is comprised of a material selected from one of titanium, aluminum, steel, plastic, a composite material, a metal, and polycarbonate.

11. The apparatus of claim 2, wherein the second structure further comprises an aircraft panel structure selected from one of a skin panel, a floor panel, a wall panel, and a honeycomb structure panel.

12. A skin panel attachment system comprising:

a frame of an aerospace vehicle having a number of edges; a number of flanges formed on the number of edges of the frame;

a number of clips having first connecting structures and second connecting structures, wherein the first connecting structures are configured to receive one of the number of flanges in channels in the first connecting structures, and wherein the second connecting structures are configured to be connected to a skin panel, wherein each second connecting structure comprises a first opening;

a number of second openings along the number of edges into the frame, wherein each flange on the number of edges of the frame is formed around one of the number of second openings, and wherein each of the number of second openings are aligned with the first opening of one of the second connecting structures when the number of clips are in desired positions;

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the skin panel having holes, wherein the second connecting structures are received in the holes; and fasteners connected to the second connecting structures and securing the skin panel to the frame.

13. The skin panel attachment system of claim **12**, wherein the frame is for an outlet of an aircraft engine.

14. The skin panel attachment system of claim **12**, further comprising:

a rod configured to be placed through one of the number of first openings and the second opening and align each of the number of clips with one of the number of flanges in the desired positions.

15. A method for connecting structures, the method comprising:

placing clips on flanges on a support structure of an aerospace vehicle such that first connecting structures on the clips receive the flanges;

aligning first openings in a second connecting structure on the clips with second openings on the support structure to position the clips into a desired position with the flanges; wherein the support structure comprises an edge, wherein the second openings are along the edge into the support structure, and wherein the flanges extend in a substantially orthogonal direction from the edge around the second openings;

positioning a second structure, wherein second connecting structures on the clips are received in holes in the second structure; and

attaching fasteners to the second connecting structures to secure the second structure to the second connecting structure.

16. The method of claim **15**, wherein aligning the first openings with second openings further comprises:

placing rods through the first openings and the second openings, wherein the clips are aligned with the flanges in desired positions.

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17. The method of claim **15**, wherein placing the clips on the flanges on the support structure comprises:

receiving the flanges in channels in the first connecting structures in the clips, wherein a shape of the channel conforms to a cross-sectional shape of the flange, wherein the channel is configured to receive the flange with an interference fit.

18. The method of claim **15**, wherein the fasteners are nuts.

19. The method of claim **15**, wherein the support structure further comprises an aircraft frame structure selected from one a rib, a spar, and a stringer, and wherein the second structure further comprises an aircraft panel structure selected from one of a skin panel, a floor panel, a wall panel, and a honeycomb structure panel.

20. A method of operating an aircraft, the method comprising:

flying the aircraft; and

holding a skin panel on a support structure of the aircraft, wherein the clips have first and second connecting structures, wherein the first connecting structures are configured to receive one of a number of flanges in channels in the first connecting structures, the second connecting structures are configured to be connected to the skin panel, and each second connecting structure comprises a first opening; wherein the support structure has a number of edges, a number of second openings along the number of edges into the support structure, and a number of flanges on the number of edges of the support structure, each flange being formed around one of the number of second openings; and wherein each of the number of second openings are aligned with the first opening of one of the second connecting structures when the clips are in desired positions, the skin panel positioned such that the clips are received in holes in the skin panel, and fasteners attached to the second connecting structures such that the support structure holds the skin panel.

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